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Fall 2015 Knight Award for Writing Exercises ar

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice; coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts: (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it, addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning entries will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing.)

To facilitate future searching of the Institute's archive, we ask that you provide a brief descriptive abstract (about 75 words) of your document, and a short list of appropriate keywords that might not appear in the text. Examples might include terms like "rhetorical situation," "style," "citation," etc. Any borrowings such as quotations from course texts or handbooks must be cited properly in the document itself.

The two winning entries will receive \$350; second place winners (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Thursday, December 17. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2015 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

~Please Print Clearly. Do not staple. Use paper clips only~

Instructor's name Daniel Bret Leraul

Department CML Course # and title 1133.102 Latin American Paranoias. Crime, Conspiracy, Terrorism.

I understand that I will receive the award for my prize-winning essay upon submission of the electronic text.

Formal Analysis

Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature

Daniel Bret Leraul

Date

12/1/2015

Knight Writing Institute Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts – Fall 2015

Instructor: Bret Leraul

Course: COML 1133.102 “Latin American Paranoiacs: Crime, Conspiracy, Terror”

Title of Writing Exercise: “Formal Analysis”

Abstract:

This handout is an advanced lesson that integrates close reading, the use of textual evidence, literary analysis, and revision skills as part of an assignment sequence for writing an argumentative essay. It consists of three parts: an in-class lesson, an out-of-class preparatory writing activity, and an in-class peer review of the writing activity. The learning outcome is for students to analyze texts at the level of their form, a crucial skill in the discipline of literary studies.

Keywords: *close reading, literary analysis, citation, evidence, argument, preparatory writing*

Rationale:

When teaching narrative art forms, whether literature or film, students tend to cling to a text’s referentiality. The common complaint among writing instructors that students summarize too much in their writing is symptomatic of this narrow focus. Students’ ability to craft complex, arguments about literary or filmic texts is limited by the narrow repertoire of questions they pose those texts – *who, what, when, where*. I have found that having students ask *how* a text conveys the referential meaning it does is the first step in encouraging them to read beyond what the text says, that is, to read critically. One simple way to engender this ‘focus on form’ is to have students identify noteworthy repetitions in a text that are indicative of an author’s choices, whether a specific camera angle in a film, the absence of proper names in a novella, or long, run-on sentences, as in the example I provided my students from a novel we read together.

Although formalist analysis derives from literary studies, it also applies to the structure of an argument and, therefore, to the revision process for argumentative essays. The handout models this skill transfer in the section “Schematic analysis” and in the peer review of the text that results from the writing activity. In this way, the handout integrates the teaching of reading and writing skills.

Finally, this focus on form helps students to cultivate their own voices as writers. Formal analysis estranges engrained reading habits by asking students to read through and around the text’s about which they write. In order to write a formal analysis, they cannot simply summarize the plot or argument of their sources, but must critically dialogue with them.

This complex assignment should come later in the semester when students have already been introduced to techniques for close reading, providing evidentiary support, and structuring arguments. I have found that skills practiced earlier in the semester must be returned to later on and deliberately addressed during class time in order to cement, integrate, and extend those skills. Another reason for this iterative process is that, as the semester progresses and students are asked to perform more complex tasks, they tend to retreat to those skills they feel they have mastered. Often this means the loss of their own voices and a return to summarizing, a return that this handout is designed to forestall.

Much of the terminology I employ draws on other handouts and activities in a sequence of out-of-class, pre-writing assignments I call "Reading Responses". As I state in the handout, students are encouraged to use their reading responses as building blocks for their formal essays. That said, the handout could be easily adapted to suit an instructor's particular terminology and essay sequencing.

The handout is composed of three parts: an explanation of the technique of formal analysis, a model of a formal analysis performed on a text from the course, and an analysis of the argument made in the model formal analysis. These parts correspond to the three tasks the students are asked to perform: reading for repetitions at the level of the text's form, writing a brief claim about the text based on its formal repetitions, and then analyzing their peers' claims using the same techniques they used to analyze the source text.

The first model orients students to the reading and writing portions of the assignment (Steps 1 and 2). The second model explains the first and serves to orient students to the extension activity (Step 3). Student's formal analyses are posted to a public forum on BlackBoard, which, in addition to the peer review, makes students accountable to each other and not just the instructor just as it provide them with student models in addition to the instructor's model.

Results:

Across the board, students' reading responses made sophisticated claims based on critical reading (cf. "Student Responses" below). The assignment was so successful that I used it the following week with a different source text. The essays that resulted from the sequence of which this handout is a part were the most analytically complex and best argued of the semester.

Reading Response 8: Formal Analysis

Due: Friday, October 23, 2015

In what is called the ‘truth’ of a work of art, the mutual relationship of its elements as against its relationship to the object that it depicts is also probably much more significant than is usually acknowledged. ...So long as the elaboration is harmonious and consistent, the whole will produce an impression of ‘inner truth,’ whether of not an individual part corresponds to outward reality and satisfies the claim to ‘truth’ in the ordinary and substantial sense. Truth in a work of art means that as a whole it keeps the promise which one part has, as it were, voluntarily offered us.¹

– Georg Simmel

A structure only starts to move, and become animated [...] [when] the elements we have previously defined, taken in their differential relations, are organized necessarily into series. But so organized they relate to other series, constituted by other [...] elements and other relations [...] One must state simply that every structure is serial, multiserial, and would not function without this condition.²

– Gilles Deleuze

Formalism is a mode of artistic production and reception that values the internal coherence of the structure or form of an (artistic) object over its referential meaning. A formalist (or structuralist) literary analysis asks *first* about how a text’s discrete parts function with one another and within the whole. Only then does it ask about how this form (or structure) relates to a text’s plot, its central themes or questions, its social or historical contexts. This is often accomplished through tracing the repetition of certain tropes, figures, or stylistic choices and interpreting the significance of these recurrences, although this is *by no means* the only technique.

Here is an example of a formalist analysis of our current reading. Note how the claim is nearly inseparable from the analysis, and how the textual evidence is ‘sandwiched’ between the analysis.

The most striking formal feature of Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Senselessness*³ is its lengthy sentences, which give his novella a sense of hurried breathlessness. Not only does the breathlessness of these repetitious, page-long sentences reflect the narrator’s anxious state of mind. Along with the colloquial diction – the narrator does not shy away from the vulgar register – they may also give the prose the relatable qualities of speech. Most importantly, however, this stylistic choice furthers the development of what I see as the novel’s central questions: What is the power of speech? And, specifically, where is the threshold between confession as a therapeutic catharsis and confession as coercion and control?

At a birthday celebration for one of the forensic anthropologists working to exhume and identify the remains of the indigenous victims of systematic state violence, our narrator finds himself trying to explain the literary value he sees in some of the testimonies he is copyediting as part of the unnamed country’s truth and reconciliation report. At some point in one 500-word sentence, the narrator becomes suspicious of his conversation partner’s curiosity,

¹ Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. Trans. David Frisby. Routledge: New York, 2011. 115. Print.

² Deleuze, Gilles. “How do we Recognize Structuralism?” *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953-1974*. Trans. David Lapoujade. Ed. Michael Taormina. Semiotext(e): New York, 2004. 271. Print

³ Castellanos Moya, Horacio. *Senselessness*. Trans. Katherine Silver. New York: New Directions, 2008. Print.

as if he were placing me inside a bubble constructed out of his crafty questions and my inevitable answers, as if the guy had known ahead of time about the psychological problems that afflicted me and that consisted of wanting to tell everything once I'd been encouraged to start talking, down to the hairs and the smells, spill it all out to the point of satiety, compulsively, in a kind of verbal spasm, as if it were an orgasmic race that would culminate in my total abandon, until I was left without secrets, until my interlocutor knew all he wanted to know, in an exhaustive confession after which I would suffer the worst possible backlash. (112).

He goes on to describe how these words “had senselessly poured out of my mouth” (113). The incitement to discourse is very often a compulsion, as Foucault tells us and as Castellanos Moya suggests here. And like the narrator’s senseless glossolalia, the one thousand one-hundred pages of the truth and reconciliation report he must copyedit—and whose page count recurs with the regularity of an epithet in some Greek epic—may not bring to light the horrific truth of this nation’s recent past. Like the narrator’s breathless, anxiety inducing sentences, the greater the accumulation of testimonial narratives, the more words collected ostensibly to bandage the wounds of the past, the more disorienting and senseless do the experiences of senseless violence become.

Schematic analysis:

Formal claim and analysis: The novel’s lengthy sentences...

1. ...give a sense of breathlessness, which...
 - 1.1. ...reflects the narrator’s state of mind (conveys anxiety to reader)
 - 1.2. ...gives the prose an oral quality (makes it relatable to reader) (+ vulgar diction as support)
2. **(Pivot to central claim)** ...further the development of the novel’s central questions about...
 - 2.1. the power of speech, specifically,
 - 2.1.1. two aspects of confession (as control, as healing)

Evidence: One such lengthy, breathless sentence, which touches on the theme of confession as compulsion

1. Context (piece-meal summary)
2. Quotation (lengthy, because that is the formal element in question)
3. Analysis (on the text’s own terms: “senselessness”)
4. **Pivot to central plot element**: this example of the narrator’s glossolalia is like the report, in that...
 - 4.1 ...both are lengthy
 - 4.2... both are compulsive / compelled (implied)
 - 4.3... both may be senseless (i.e. meaningless) like...
 - 4.3.1 ...the senseless (i.e. meaningless *and* unprovoked) violence the report recounts.

When reading a novel, it is easy to fall into passive reading habits. Therefore, focus your reading response for this week on a recurring formal element in Horacio Castellanos Moya’s *Senselessness*. Keep in mind that the claim you make in your reading response may be used in writing Essay 4.

Step 1: Identify a recurring formal element

Step 2: Make a claim based on the analysis of that formal element. Make your analysis / claim ‘pivot’ to some plot or thematic element.

Step 3: **Next class**, you will schematically analyze your peers’ reading responses along the lines of the model provided above. We will pay close attention to the use of evidence and how each writer ‘pivots’ from formal analysis to a larger claim about the novel.

Student Responses

In Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*, the more imaginative the episodes that the protagonist experiences becomes, the farther he is removed from reality. The catalyst for his fictitious fantasies is the repetition of the quotes and the horrific events that occur in the 1100-page *testimonio*.

The protagonist has a grip on reality when he first begins copyediting the *testimonio*. Though intrigued by the quotes, the narrator is able to appreciate the quotes from a distance: "*I am not complete in the mind...* I said to myself, morbidly mulling it over, trying to imagine what waking up must have been like for this indigenous man" (2). At this point in time, the narrator is still aware of the distinction between himself and the tortured native. He feels sympathy for the man, but not empathy for he has never experienced such atrocities to make him feel as broken as the indigenous man has.

However as the novel progresses, the narrator loses himself in the atrocities that he learns about in the *testimonio*. This can be seen towards the end of the novel, when a repetitious image from the manuscript sends the protagonist off into a schizophrenic episode.

... the same image kept asserting itself whenever I took a break, an image that recurred several times in the report and that little by little invaded me until it had taken complete possession of me, at which point I stood up... as if I were that lieutenant who had brutally burst into the hut of that indigenous family, grabbed in my iron hand by the heel that baby only a few months old, raised over my head ...I came back to my senses and I noticed that I had been about to bash my arm, which I had been swinging violently over my head...(125).

The protagonist has lost the distance he once had while copyediting the manuscript. He no longer feels sympathy for the tribulations that the natives went through, but rather empathy. This can be inferred by the way the imagination inspired by the manuscript is no longer contained within his thoughts, instead they have leaked into his actions, into his reality, and the protagonist can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy.

The slow break between the protagonist mind and reality demonstrates how fragile one's perception of reality is. It is a delicate line that is kept distinct only when the difference between truth and fantasy are known. If one cannot distinguish, or is not aware of former, then the line between reality and fantasy will not exist.

— Genesis Herebia, Cornell '19

In Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness*, the narrator is a copyeditor for the 1100-page manuscript of *testimonios* documenting systematic state terrorism against indigenous peoples. However, despite being a copyeditor, whose main job is to improve the formatting and style of writing (including grammar), the narrator's style in the novel is characterized by a certain sloppiness—the sentences are run on, dependent clauses are not separated from independent clauses by commas, and multiple, separate ideas can bleed together in the tide of words in a sentence. It makes one wonder why the narrator was chosen for the delicate and vital task of copyediting the manuscript since he seems to have such problems utilizing the tools of his trade in what we may say is his own work. This tension between being a copyeditor and having a sloppy style can be addressed if, however, we consider *Senselessness* to be the narrator's *testimonio*. *Testimonios* are focused on the "truth of experience" as opposed to "objective truth," meaning that it is not so much the undeniable reality of an event that matters so much as the experience and emotions of the event, and *testimonio* as a literary genre cares more about evoking and simulating the experiences and emotions of the events than being factually correct. We readers see the power of *testimonios* in the novel, with the emotions and experiences described in the manuscript consuming the narrator's fantasies and actions. My argument is that the novel aims to act as a *testimonio* of the narrator's experiences, and that the stylistic sloppiness serves to show that it is not so much the nuts and bolts of the story that matter, but the truth of experience.

— Taylar Clement, Cornell '19

